

Invitation to World Literature: Journey to the West Video Transcript

Yu:

You have a whole novel devoted to fantastic cycles of captivity and release. Unimaginable fights with monsters.

Hwang:

It's got fighting, it's got love, and... somewhat... and lust, certainly.

Damrosch:

From the beginning this was an immensely popular work. The Journey to the West had the attractions of a long running mini-series, really a maxi-series.

Zimmerman:

It has both a dazzling surface, and profound depth. It's always in fantastic balance. There is always a doubleness going on.

Wolkstein:

It appeals to all ages. Because it's about the child in us, and then it's about what do we do about, suffering?

GRAPHIC: JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Damrosch:

The Journey to the West was regarded in China as one of the great masterpieces of its era. Since the publication in 1592 you find it in any number of adaptations, comic books, film, TV series, stage dramas, rewritings, abridgements.

Hwang:

The thing that kind of pleasantly surprised me the first time I encountered Journey to the West is really how much fun the story is. Because it is a Buddhist allegory, you can look at it from the spiritual point of view, and you can draw all sorts of lessons about, kind of, living, and, our relationship to the temporal world from it. And then, you know, on the other side of the spectrum, it's a really good adventure story with a really fun main character.

Damrosch:

As its original title suggests, Journey to the West is about a magnificent journey of a monk and his three companions to go from China to India to seek sacred scriptures. This work is one of many in which there is a nominal hero, a monk, often called three baskets or Tripitaka and his faithful sidekicks who are three, one of whom especially tends to steal the show, a monkey.

Yu:

The whole structure of the story is almost a Chinese version in a sense, anticipating the Wizard of Oz. I forgot the young lady's name. Dorothy. You have Dorothy and then you

have the lion, you have the Tin Man. And they embarked on this journey in quest of something very important.

Damrosch:

The story opens with the creation of a monkey from a stone. The whole first quarter of the novel involves his exploits, increasingly endangering heaven and earth.

Zimmerman:

There was a rock, that since the creation of the world had been worked upon by the pure essences of heaven, and the fine savors of earth, the vigor of sunshine and the grace of moonlight, till at last it became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a playing ball.

GRAPHIC: MONKEY RAISES HELL

Wolkstein:

"The sun, shone on the stone, the moon, warmed the stone, the earth perfumed the stone, the wind blew, the stone split apart, and out leapt Stone Monkey."

Hwang:

You know, Monkey King is kind of an iconic figure in popular culture in China. So, even though I was born and raised in Los Angeles, I was sort of aware that there was this, um, kind of rascally Monkey character that jumps around and does a lot of things that he is not supposed to.

Damrosch:

Always making mischief for the fun of it. Boastful, full of himself, can't resist trying everything, insatiably curious, always getting into trouble.

Wolkstein:

He goes, and he learns from the great Daoist Master. He gets 72 powers of transformation. He can make himself invisible he can become as large as the universe as small as a little hair on his wrist. All these extraordinary powers are his.

Ma:

His hair is magical. He can pull a wad of hair from the back his head and blow on it. And, they can become hundreds of thousands of monkeys. He could be another version of himself or anything he wants.

Hwang:

You just get the sense of somebody who's going up to heaven and just spitting on all the authorities. And feeling that he deserves to sit on the throne of heaven.

Owen:

Why do people like this particular episode so much. Monkey raising hell in heaven. I think perhaps because it's a world where you're supposed to be very serious and dour and respectful. And here is this figure who has no respect for anybody.

Damrosch:

Amid all these cosmic high jinks as Monkey's making more and more trouble when they confront him he replies in much the way that a rather strong warlord might do to an embassy from the emperor. They come and complain at one point. What crime is there you've not committed. You have stolen peaches and stolen wine, upset the high feast, purloined Lao Zi's elixir and then taken more wine for your banquet here. You've piled up sin upon sin. Do you not realize what you have done? Quite true said Monkey, all quite true. What are you going to do about it?

Ma:

By the time I read about the monkey it was in the late 70's. In China... that sense of order was so prevalent and so much part of your inner thinking to see this creature that could act this way you felt this exhilaration on the inside. It was so drastically different from the reality that I lived in.

Hwang:

Particularly growing up in the West you have this notion that Chinese culture is all about selflessness and not living in the material world and having respect for your elders and all that kind of thing, and Monkey is the opposite version of that. He's anarchic he's disrespectful he's selfish, um, and he's a lot of fun.

Ma:

The monkey is creating mayhem in the heavenly temple. This set of illustration was probably done in the Xian Dynasty, 2, 300 years ago. This is the monkey and he's running away. There's fire going on. He's probably subdued some of these people.

Hwang:

And then at the end of that section he gets put under a rock.

GRAPHIC: MONKEY V. BUDDHA

Thurman:

[Reading]: "I'll have a wager with you, said Buddha. If you're really so clever jump off the palm of my right hand and if you succeed I tell the Jade Emperor to come live with me in the Western Paradise and you shall have his throne with out more adieu. But, if you fail you shall go back to earth and do penance there for many [inaudible] before you come to me again with your talk."

So then Monkey then leaped like 108,000 leagues and then he came to these five pillars at the end of the universe and looked behind and saw Buddha hadn't followed him and he was laughing away. And he took a pee in between two pillars and then he noticed he was still in Buddha's hand and he was peeing on Buddha's finger.

[Chuckle]

So, there's Buddha, took him and slammed him down on the earth and put a mountain on top of him.

Wolkstein:

Buddha placed him in the mountain called Five Element Mountain that held him captive. In the eighties I was telling big epics at the American Museum of Natural History and found this one. And I told it up to the place where Monkey is buried under the Five Element Mountain. "He does not know that he will remain captive 500 years."

And recently I found in fact it was the most immense, exciting epic that I have worked on. What was so exciting is the adventures that Monkey has with the Priest. That's to me the essence of the story.

Zimmerman:

What makes Journey to the West unique in certain ways, is that it's an epic that grew out of an actual event.

GRAPHIC: BASED ON A TRUE STORY

Damrosch:

The novel is based on an historical fact. There was in fact a Buddhist priest in the Tang Dynasty about nine hundred years before Wu Cheng En's time who went to India, stayed there for about seventeen years, learned Sanskrit, amassed a huge trove of scriptures and brought them back to China where he was richly rewarded by the Emperor.

Owen:

Xuanzang in the Tang in the 7th century was a very devout monk. He wanted to basically get the code by which the monastic establishment was supposed to be run. The code laid down by Buddha.

Yu:

Xuanzang's journey if you could imagine would be like someone trying to walk from about Portland, Maine to Los Angeles. But the Rocky Mountains are not as tall as the Himalayas.

Thurman:

He's a very brave monk really. The Gobi desert is no joke. Taklamakan Desert and then there's all kind of robbers everywhere.

GRAPHIC: FROM FACT TO FICTION

Yu:

The novel, clearly in Chinese literary history, took a long time to evolve. From history, into fiction, that process took several centuries.

Owen:

It grows slowly always a retelling. In storytelling, in theater in many different venues until its finally written down in the present version.

Damrosch:

The Chinese had two key ingredients for the spread of long narratives. They had wood blocks that were very easy to carve and print cheaply and they had paper. They actually invented paper. And with their wood blocks and their paper they printed massive numbers of copies of massively large books.

Yu:

The interesting thing is the novel never, never really followed history. Only the barest outline was borrowed.

Damrosch:

In the novel Wu Cheng'en takes this historical nugget of a story and builds this amazing adventure around it. In which they have 81 separate challenges involving the monk and his three traveling companions.

GRAPHIC: MONKEY'S MONK

Yu:

In the novel, Tripitaka is a very ordinary person. The man is a coward, he is wimpy, in fact that is a very good word to describe the monk.

Hwang:

The Tang priest is, um, actually kind of whiny. I mean he's not Mr. Miyagi.

Zimmerman:

He's not at all brave in the face of danger. Just the opposite, he wants to run in the other direction. And he's always starting to sit by the road and crying and wishing he could go back home, and all of this kind of thing. All of which I think is really sweet and appealing about him.

Damrosch:

He is not a figure of divine enlightenment and calm. He is actually terrified out of his wits by everything that happens to him. He is quite helpless, he is always getting into trouble. And he usually has to be rescued by Monkey.

GRAPHIC: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SCRIPTURES

Zimmerman:

The monk comes by and picks up Monkey from under the mountain, and Monkey is freed on the condition that he accompany the monk on the rest of his journey, all the way to the Western Heaven. And they end up picking up two other disciples, Pigsy and Sandy.

Thurman:

Monkey becomes this sort of protector, and uh, like the Mighty Mouse, he's like Mighty Mouse, mighty Monkey who helps the prince go to the West to get the Buddhist scriptures.

Ma:

ZhūBādy, he's very fat, he's gluttonous, he loves to eat.

Thurman:

Pigsy is just uh, he's kind of a fun guy, he's like a big fat guy.

Yu:

Lovable, but very, very lazy.

Hwang:

And then there is Sand. He's a big friar, and I'm not quite sure what he does except that he is a kind of stabilizing force for the trio that is guarding the Tang Priest.

Damrosch:

It is something of the quality of a sitcom that you might see in Seinfeld today. In which you have your nominal central character who is relatively colorless surrounded by three very vivid sidekicks: Tripitaka is Jerry, and you've got Kramer as Monkey, George as Pigsy certainly, that leaves Sandy as Elaine and you've got the whole group.

Owen:

If we sent any of these characters off to India, meeting and overcoming demons by himself, it would be a very boring novel. But put the four together and you have a dynamic set of personalities who are also allegorical figures.

GRAPHIC: PARTS OF A WHOLE

Yu:

The pilgrims could be understood as different aspects of a single individual

Zimmerman:

You have parts of the human personality: Pig, the appetite, the big fat baby, who just wants to eat and is absolutely impatient, there is that part of oneself. There is the mind that's like agitated, and restless, and always demanding, and always in mischief, and impatient.

Damrosch:

There is in Buddhist philosophy the imagery of Monkey of the mind which refers to the mind's ability to jump around from thought to thought and the difficulty of controlling and calming the mind.

Yu:

In their religious writings, for centuries, they wrote jottings of notes to remind themselves in their daily devotions to say: 'Keep the Monkey of the mind under control; don't let him loose. "

Zimmerman:

And Master has to keep him under control by putting this band around his head which can control him by thought. Master can do a chant that punishes Monkey when he gets out of hand and keeps the mind under control.

Yu:

One of the original insights of Buddhism, is heaven and hell is created by your own self, your own mind. That creates your character, your misery, your happiness.

Zimmerman:

The whole journey, which on the surface is a mortal man accompanied by a Monkey, and a pig, and a river spirit, is also a journey into enlightenment.

Owen:

It's the process of learning - the world of surfaces and illusions is just that, and to get beyond that and to calm the mind and distill it.

Thurman:

The basic philosophy of Buddhism is basically the art and science of happiness, you could say. That ignorant image of the self, that it is this thing apart from the world and more important than other things, is one that causes a being to be in struggle with the world and to suffer. If you understand your interwoven-ness with the world, that it is part of you and you are part of it, then what happens is that you are going to be happy, really happy – not just happy like a person who wins something and then loses the next thing or worries about losing the next thing – happiness in that reality itself is happiness is what you understand.

Damrosch:

Monkey gets immortality early on but then he still needs to go on his quest, because he wants to become an enlightened being, it is better than mere immortality, he wants to kind of rise above his base earthly nature and really become a Buddha figure, an enlightened figure.

Over the course of the full set of 81 adventures over 100 chapters in this very long novel in the full version, the pilgrims encounter one demon after another, one shape shifting person after another, one adventure after another. Life is like this: it is one damn thing after another, after another, after another. It has no shape, it has no meaning, except if

you become enlightened and see the larger pattern hidden within any one of these things.

Yu:

The novel among other things thrives on certain types of religious numerology. NINE happens to be a very important number in both segments of Buddhism, and certainly in Chinese Taoism. And 9 x 9 that is even a higher level of importance, so 9 x 9 is 81.

Wolkstein:

I can't tell you what each of the eighty-one means. I don't know. The one that most intrigues me so far is when Monkey King splits and there's a second Monkey King. He transforms himself into himself as he who hears everything and harms because he's so angry. And they begin to fight and they can't tell who is who. So what is it that's learned is that the instinctual reaction which is to be angry and to act out he has to modify.

Zimmerman:

When I adapt, I am often dealing with a text that is much larger than is going to fit into a single evening, so I have to select episodes based on the fact that I have an idea on how to put it on stage. I remember doing the brambles because I loved how the metaphor, the symbolism of it is so clear - That they get caught in these brambles of thought, this discussion that Tripitaka thinks has only gone on one night but it has actually gone on a year.

GRAPHIC: JOURNEY TO THE WEST GOES WEST

Owen:

Monkey did not get out of East Asia until the 20th century with a translation by Arthur Waley.

Thurman:

Journey To The West, I originally read in the abridged version of Arthur Waley years and years ago as a college student, and I thought it was kind of fun. But years later I read the version of Anthony Yu from the University of Chicago, who translated the unabridged version, and that really blew my mind. The description of the clothing, the palaces, the landscapes, it's so vivid and brilliant. And of course at the time I was first reading it, we still had Mao around and all poor Chinese all had to go out with no jewelry and wearing blue pajamas, and that kind of thing, you know that blue suit that he made them all wear.

Hwang:

I (made) a television miniseries based on Journey to the West: "The Lost Empire". I think the main thing I wanted to convey were these two opposing tensions at the heart of Chinese society and culture. The impulse toward authoritarianism and the impulse toward freedom, with a particular emphasis on the latter. Which was the reason to be Monkey and to have Monkey be a prominent character.

GRAPHIC: THE GODDESS OF MERCY

Wolkstein:

Quan Yin is part of what makes this story extraordinary. Quan Yin is a Bodhisattva: which means that she has reached Buddha-hood, but has decided to remain living on earth so that she can help those who are suffering. (Putting on a hat) This is Quan Yin.

Yu:

Quan Yin is somewhat like the good witch in The Wizard of Oz, but even better would be Athena in The Odyssey, because Athena had a very special relationship with Odysseus.

Wolkstein:

All through the adventures that Monkey King has with the T'ang priest, every time something goes wrong and he can't solve it he goes to Quan Yin. And even though he will make fun of her, argue with her, we see her power and her wisdom slowly, slowly enter Monkey King.

Damrosch:

Throughout their journeys, the monk and Monkey are continually arguing about what's the appropriate way to behave. Here is one episode in which Monkey has killed several opponents and Tripitaka is upset.

Wolkstein:

"Master! They're dead! All of them!" And then there is this long pause and the Buddhist priest says: "You killed them? You killed them? We don't kill; we relieve suffering."

Thurman:

[Reading]: "'You have behaved with the cruelty that ill becomes one of your sacred calling.' 'If I had not killed them' said Monkey, 'they would have killed you.' 'A priest' said Tripitaka 'should be ready to die, rather than commit acts of violence.'"

If Tripitaka in his mission to go get the scriptures were to have just said "okay kill me robbers" then he never would have gotten any scriptures [inaudible...in China] so there is this kind of complexity.

Damrosch:

Left to himself, Tripitaka would die a hundred times over, he's just helpless. He's too non-violent for a violent world. Left to himself, Monkey would destroy the universe. He is too violent, too impulsive, too chaotic: so they are kind of like a Yin and a Yang, a kind of a back and forth, they really need to correct each other.

Wolkstein:

The T'ang priest sends him away for murdering, again, the robbers. Over and over he is killing people because he loses his temper, and finally the T'ang priest says to him "No more. No more. I don't want to travel with you. I can't travel with a murderer" And Monkey king is so sad, he goes to Quan Yin and bursts into tears and says to her "What

am I to do? I do everything I can for this priest, robbers are attacking us, if I didn't defend him he would be dead and yet he sends me away for doing what I have to do." And she says to him "You know that the Tang priest is a priest and he doesn't want to cause suffering and you have a choice, you don't have to kill. You have many other ways that you can stop a robber. You need to change."

GRAPHIC: YOU NEED TO CHANGE

Ma:

The Olympics was like the big celestial party that China was putting on for the world. While people are putting on their best dress there's busloads of people being shipped out of the capital city who helped build this city, but they're not being considered good enough to be seen at this party. You wanted some kind of hero that would be daring enough to stand up against injustice. night it was just like an epiphany, this vision came to me. I just saw the Monkey riding on a cloud over Tiananmen Square and he's like looking like this, you know with his staff in hand. Technically, we ended up using a smoke bomb. We just projected the image into the sky. When there's no smoke you don't see anything. But if there's smoke that came over, the whole image of the Monkey would appear and it became really magical. The fact that the Monkey appears over Tiananmen Square was extremely important to me. This was over the one symbol that everyone recognized as China and it symbolized the central government, the seat of their throne.

Zimmerman:

Journey to the West first came into my realm when my then, boyfriend, was reading it. And I'll never forget this. We were sitting on a porch in Maine and he suddenly went, oh, and he sort of exhaled. He was struck. And I said what is it? And he said they're crossing a river and Tripitaka sees his own body floating in the river dead. And it's a happy occasion. That farewell to the self...

[Reading]: Tripitaka stepped lightly ashore, he had discarded his earthly body, he was cleansed from the corruption of the senses from the fleshly inheritance of those bygone years. His was now the transcendent wisdom, that leads to the further shore, the mastery that knows no bounds.

Hwang:

If not for the creation of Monkey, I don't know if Journey To The West would be something we would be reading 500 years later. He's prideful, and he's arrogant, and he overestimates his own abilities – and I think people really relate to that. It's a character who makes mistakes and yet, in spite of that, he becomes the most important figure in this critical, um, spiritual journey.

Thurman:

It holds out that Buddhist idea that through education beings can improve, and lessen their flaws, and increase their good qualities, and that there is an idea which is that an enlightened being – which is not just something that, like a god or something that has

always been perfect and is sort of separate from life but that a human being can evolve into becoming like that.

Wolkstein:

Journey To The West I think is journey to understanding. The T'ang priest finally stands right there ready to go see Buddha and he says to Monkey: "How can I thank you for taking me on this journey? I could never have done it without you" The Monkey King says back: "There's not two of us, there is one. There is no one to thank."

GRAPHIC: JOURNEY TO THE WEST

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